

EU-Turkey tensions mount over Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean

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The unilateral opening of Varosha (Mara?) in northern Cyprus and calls for a “two-state solution” and an ethnic division of Cyprus into Greek and Turkish zones by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are stoking tensions between the European Union (EU) and Turkey. Once a world-famous tourist destination, Varosha has been in the buffer zone since the war and Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and is a ghost town. On October 8, parts of the region were opened as conflicts mount inside NATO over influence in the eastern Mediterranean.

On November 15, on his official visit for the 37th anniversary of the Turkish Cypriot declaration of independence, Erdoğan visited Varosha together with several ministers, his far-right ally Devlet Bahçeli (chairman of the Nationalist Movement Party, MHP) and Ersin Tatar—the newly-elected president of the Northern Cyprus administration (TRNC), recognized only by Turkey.

In Cyprus, Erdoğan blamed the EU powers and the Republic of Cyprus for the failure of previous peace talks. Opposing further negotiations for the unification of northern and southern Cyprus, he put forward a “two separate states solution” as a new turn in his government’s Cyprus policy.

Erdoğan accused the EU powers of “still lying today... There are two different peoples, two separate states in Cyprus today. A two-state solution needs to be negotiated on the basis of sovereign equality. ... The will of the TRNC people has also been manifested in this direction in the last elections. As the guarantor country, neither we nor the TRNC can tolerate diplomatic games anymore.”

The last negotiations collapsed in 2017 amid the scramble over newly-discovered oil and gas resources around Cyprus and increased regional tensions due to NATO wars in Libya and Syria. When the Republic of Cyprus gave hydrocarbon exploration licenses to major

energy corporations, Turkey declared that they were invalid and that the TRNC has equal rights to the resources. It deployed its drill ships, escorted by warships, to waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus.

In the October 18 presidential elections, Ankara backed former Prime Minister Ersin Tatar, who supports a two-state solution, against outgoing President Mustafa Akıncı, who speaks for sections of the Turkish Cypriot bourgeoisie proposing “unification” with the south and to join the EU.

Tatar met with his counterpart Nicos Anastasiades at the beginning of November. In the meeting, they promised future negotiations between northern and southern administrations with participation from three “guarantor” countries—Britain, Greece and Turkey—as well as UN officials. Although Tatar claimed that Anastasiades did not exclude a two-state solution, Anastasiades flatly denied this.

Turkish negotiations with Cyprus are inflaming a violent struggle for influence between the major powers across the region that has escalated especially since last year.

The “EastMed” pipeline project to transport gas to Europe via Greece and Italy provoked a bitter reaction last year from Turkey. The EU powers backed this project, but Ankara objected to being excluded and unveiled a “blue homeland” map claiming large portions of the Aegean Sea. Having made a bilateral maritime and military agreement with the Libyan-Islamist Government of National Accord (GNA) in November last year, Ankara is using Cyprus as a bargaining chip with the EU.

The November 22 naval incident in the eastern Mediterranean only intensifies these tensions. As part of the EU mission Operation Irini, German soldiers boarded and searched a Turkish cargo vessel headed for Libya, a move strongly protested by the Turkish government. In June, when the French frigate Courbet tried to stop

Turkish ships carrying cargo to Libya, Turkish warships briefly illuminated it with their targeting radar, indicating they were ready to open fire.

Given these explosive regional tensions, and the irreconcilable conflict between Erdoğan's proposal for a two-state solution in Cyprus and the Greek side's call for a united Cyprus in the EU, these talks already appear to be headed for failure.

EU officials are stepping up threats to impose sanctions on Turkey. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas declared: "It is up to Turkey what decision will be taken at the EU summit in December." Calling the Erdoğan's visit a "provocation," Maas said sanctions against Turkey will be on the agenda: "If we see no positive signals coming from Turkey by December, only further provocations such as Erdoğan's visit to North Cyprus, then we are heading for a difficult debate

Maas and his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian also dealt with Turkey in a joint op-ed on future trans-Atlantic relations with a Biden administration in the White House in the *Washington Post* on November 16, writing: "We will have to address Turkey's problematic behavior in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond."

In advance of an upcoming EU leaders summit on December 10-11, the European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution last Thursday in support of Cyprus urging EU leaders to "take action and impose tough sanctions in response to Turkey's illegal actions," according to Reuters.

Although they are "allies" within NATO, France and Turkey in particular are locked in an escalating conflict after Paris militarily backed Athens with fighter jets and other advanced weaponry against Ankara in the eastern Mediterranean. France recently strengthened its ties with Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the region, including joint naval drills with Cairo in the Mediterranean. Moreover, for the first time, France and the UAE are participating in the "Medusa" exercises in the Mediterranean from November 30 to December 6, 2020, which is part of the tripartite cooperation between Cyprus, Greece and Egypt active since 2017. Paris and Ankara also backed rival sides in the Libyan, Syrian and Armenian-Azeri wars.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently denounced Ankara's actions in the region. In Paris to meet French President Emmanuel Macron, he told the French daily *Le Figaro*: "We also mentioned [Ankara's] action in Libya where it also sent forces from third-party countries, and its action in the eastern Mediterranean," adding: "Europe

and the United States must work together to convince Erdogan such actions are not in the interest of his people." Although Pompeo visited Istanbul after Paris, he made the unprecedented move of not meeting Turkish officials.

The Greek government also denounced Erdoğan's visit to Varosha, calling it a "provocation without precedent" and demanding EU sanctions. In a November 14 statement, the Greek Foreign Ministry said: "This action adds to Turkey's ongoing and increasing violations of international legality in the Eastern Mediterranean. We condemn it in the most categorical manner and expect it to be discussed in depth at the upcoming December meeting of the European Council."

Anastasiades also said such actions also "do not contribute to the creation of a favorable, positive climate for the resumption of talks for the solution of the Cyprus problem."

Increasingly isolated in the region, Turkey has sought to develop ties with Britain, which has bases in Cyprus as the former colonial power. After joint naval exercises in the eastern Mediterranean with a British destroyer in September, the Turkish defense ministry announced in November that Turkish F-16 jets had participated in exercises with Royal Air Force (RAF) Eurofighter Typhoons. It added that these exercises were the first of their kind between the Turkish and British air forces.

Meanwhile, on November 13, Greek, Cypriot and Israeli defense ministers announced an agreement to step up military cooperation on training programs, intelligence sharing and cyber-security. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz said they agreed during talks in Nicosia, Cyprus, to "promote large-scale industry cooperation that will bolster our defense abilities and create thousands of jobs for all three economies." According to the *Middle East Monitor*, they are working to involve more parties in their partnership, especially the United States.



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